The Breath and the Machine

Leader Guide · a fifteen-minute Culture class

The article: Elizabeth Rayne, *Popular Mechanics*, October 2026, reporting Jeff Stibel, "From chemistry to cognition: the adaptive origins of consciousness under constraint," *Frontiers in Neuroscience*, 1 September 2026 (a "Hypothesis and Theory" paper).

The one thing to land: the human self was *given* by God's breath, *broken* by grasping, and *healed* by the One who did not grasp. The machine is not frightening because it might wake up; it is a warning because it shows cleverness with no breath in it.

0:00 – 2:00 · The story

Say, in your own words: People fear AI will "wake up." A scientist, Jeff Stibel, says that fear rests on a mistake. Being clever (he calls it *cognition*) is not the same as being a self. A self, he says, is a living thing managing the conflicts inside it when its own survival is at stake. Chatbots have every need met by us and no stake in anything, so he thinks they are not conscious.

Ask: **"Do you think a machine could ever be a person? Why or why not?"** Take two answers. Do not debate them yet.

Do not say: that the scientist is an enemy, or that science is against faith. He gets half of this right, and we will say so.

2:00 – 5:00 · Where the self comes from

> **Genesis 2:7** — then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature. (ESV)

Point out the **two steps**: formed from dust, *then* breath. A finished body without breath is not yet a living person. Adam did not become a living soul by being well built.

> **Job 32:8** — But it is the spirit in man, the breath of the Almighty, that makes him understand. (ESV)

Then the turn: Stibel's theory needs scarcity: a creature whose needs are all met has no reason to be conscious. But Adam in Eden had every need met and was wide awake. And the first lack he felt was not hunger or danger:

> **Genesis 2:18** — Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” (ESV)

Say: **In Scripture, the self is first relational: made by Someone, made for someone.**

5:00 – 8:00 · Where the inner war came from

> **Genesis 3:7** — Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. (ESV)
>
> **Genesis 3:10** — And he said, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.” (ESV)

Say: Eyes opened, they knew themselves exposed, they were afraid, they hid. That *is* "internal conflict in a system whose own survival is at stake." Stibel has measured something real. He has measured the self **after the fall**, not the self as God made it.

> **Romans 7:24–25** — Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. (ESV)

Designated cut if you are short of time: skip Romans 7 and go straight to Habakkuk.

8:00 – 11:00 · "Can this teach?"

> **Psalm 115:4–5** — Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. (ESV)
>
> **Habakkuk 2:18–19** — “What profit is an idol when its maker has shaped it, a metal image, a teacher of lies? For its maker trusts in his own creation when he makes speechless idols! Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, Awake; to a silent stone, Arise! Can this teach? Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in it. (ESV)

Ask the room: **"What question does Habakkuk ask in verse 19?"** ("Can this teach?") Let it sit.

Say: Job says the breath of the Almighty is what makes a person understand. Habakkuk says the made thing has gold, silver, even a voice of sorts, and "there is no breath at all in it." The warning is about the maker who "trusts in his own creation." And Psalm 115:8 says people become like what they trust.

The real danger is not that the machine becomes a person. It is that people treat a breathless thing as a teacher, counsellor or friend, and slowly become like it: quick,

smooth, and with nothing at stake.

Do not say: that using AI is a sin, or that computers are idols. A tool is a tool. The idol is the thing we *trust* and hand our soul to.

11:00 – 14:00 · The self that would not save itself

Say: Stibel's whole theory is that a self is anchored to its own survival. Jesus overturns that:

> **Mark 8:35** — For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. (ESV)
>
> **Philippians 2:5–7** — Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. (ESV)

Say: **Adam grasped at being like God (Gen 3:5). Christ, who was in the form of God, did not grasp.** The fall anchored the self to itself; the cross anchors it to the Father.

> **1 Corinthians 6:19–20** — Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (ESV)

14:00 – 15:00 · Send them out

Four things for the week:

1. **Do not be afraid** (2 Timothy 1:7).
2. **Use tools as tools.**
3. **Do not hand your soul to a breathless thing.** Confession, counsel, prayer and friendship belong to God and to people with breath (1 John 5:21).
4. **Watch what you are becoming.**

Pray the closing prayer. **Stop there.**

If you only remember three things

1. **Given:** the self comes from God's breath (Gen 2:7), not from the struggle to survive.
2. **Broken:** the inner war is real, and it began with grasping (Gen 3:5–10; Rom 7:24).
3. **Healed:** the One who did not grasp (Phil 2:6–7) is the way to find your life by losing it (Mark 8:35).

Honest answers to hard questions

If someone asks…	Say…
"Could a machine ever be conscious?"	The Bible does not answer that in so many words. It tells us who gives breath, and it warns us not to trust what our own hands make.
"Isn't the soul just the brain?"	The church holds that a person is more than the body's machinery, which is why the soul lives on after death. "The spirit of the man, which is in him" (1 Cor 2:11).
"Is it wrong to use ChatGPT?"	No more than a calculator. The question is what you trust it with.
"Doesn't this article prove evolution?"	It is a "Hypothesis and Theory" paper, a proposal, not a finding. Our point here is about where the self comes from, and Scripture says: God's breath.

The full article online

This class is the fifteen-minute version of a longer Culture article, with the Greek of the Septuagint and New Testament beside the ESV and notes where the ancient texts differ:

ps-church.com/discipleship/culture/the-breath-and-the-machine

All Culture articles: **ps-church.com/discipleship/culture**

Closing prayer

Lord God, You formed us from the dust and breathed into us the breath of life. We thank You that we are not machines and not accidents, but people You made and You know. Forgive us for grasping at our own way, and for trusting the works of our own hands. Deliver us from the war inside us. Keep us from fear of what people build, and keep us from idols. Teach us to lose our lives for Your sake, so that we may find them, as Your Son did not grasp but gave Himself for us. In the name of Jesus, Amen.